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## **Gov. Ricketts Thanks Foster and Adoptive Parents for Work to Improve Lives of State Wards**

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**Caption:** Joining Gov. Pete Ricketts and First Lady Susanne Shore in recognizing all foster and adoptive parents and thanking a Lincoln family for adopting 13-year-old Joy, middle, and helping her become more successful are (left) Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services Director Doug Weinberg, First Lady Susanne Shore, Gov. Pete Ricketts, and Joy, Doug, Tracy and Austin Christensen.

**Lincoln** – Gov. Pete Ricketts and First Lady Susanne Shore recognized foster and adoptive parents across the state Tuesday (11/24) and congratulated a Lincoln couple for their extraordinary work with their adopted daughter.

"We are grateful for foster and adoptive parents in our state who provide a caring family for youth who have experienced trauma," Gov. Ricketts said. "Doug and Tracy Christensen are great examples of the loving parents who welcome our foster children into their homes and give them a better chance at life. The success they've seen starts with their love for their daughter and advocacy for her well-being."

Tracy and Doug Christensen adopted Joy, 13, who had been a ward of the state for more than four years. Difficulties in school and at home resulted in placement at a treatment facility and three other foster homes.

In 2013, Tracy met Joy at Royal Family KIDS (RFK) camp for children in the child welfare system. After interacting with her there, she decided to mentor Joy on a weekly basis.

About the time Tracy started mentoring her, Joy's foster parents notified the state that they were unable to continue care due to Joy's behaviors at school.

A couple months later, the Christensens attended an information meeting at their church about becoming foster parents. Never having considered it before, they were then interested. With encouragement from their son, Austin,

they took a 10-week training on foster parenting at Cedars Home for Children to better understand the role of foster parents.

After finding that Joy had been in the system for nine months waiting for a foster home, and facing the prospect of placement in a facility, they decided to welcome Joy as their foster child.

In addition, Tracy felt that medications prescribed for Joy were not necessary and she worked with doctors to advocate for the end of their use. They agreed and the prescriptions ended.

"From mentoring Joy, I knew there was a good person in there," Tracy said. "I wasn't convinced she was in control of her behaviors."

They also found staff at Joy's school to be great partners who worked with the Christensens to develop a plan for Joy if she encountered any difficulties in school. "We weren't sure what to expect. With her off medications and in a new family, neighborhood, school, after-school care and seeing a therapist, we wanted to be prepared. We were very thankful for the open minds and caring hearts at her school. There were minimal incidents."

In elementary school, Joy wasn't included in her fourth and fifth grade classrooms, so she struggled with reading and social skills. Working with the Child Guidance Center, she learned how to interact better with others.

To help her improve reading skills, the Christensens had Joy read out loud to them to earn TV privileges. Soon her interest exploded and Joy read 21 books over the summer and since the start of school has read another 25 books. "She loves reading now," Tracy said. "We can't get her to put a book down." She made honor roll last year and remains there this year.

"The Christensens advocated for Joy's well-being and the results are positive and obvious," said Doug Weinberg, director of Children and Family Services at DHHS. "We believe in the benefit of connecting a child with their biological parents, when in the best interests of the child. The Christensens have gone out of their way repeatedly to help their daughter's improvement by advocating for her."

One key point they learned in training was maintaining contact with the child's biological family. Studies show that state wards are traumatized when the court takes them from their home, even if abuse occurs. Maintaining a child's link with biological parents is crucial to their success.

They turned to their Department of Health and Human Services case manager, Katy Rawhouser, who searched for Joy's family. It took 30 days of ongoing searching, and some relatives didn't know she was born. A key concern was finding her biological mother, which took considerable effort, but Rawhouser located her in an assisted living facility out of state.

They all traveled to visit Joy's mom who hadn't had a visitor in seven years. Over two days, Joy talked with her mother, read and sang to her, and painted her nails. Mom brightened up after the visit of her daughter, and Joy made an important contact, including obtaining some much-needed photos.

Not only was Joy excited, but so were the Christensens. "It was very important to us because it was so important to Joy," said Tracey. "She didn't even have a picture of her mom."

Rawhouser also found more relatives out of state and the Christensens helped Joy connect with them. She also talks to her step sisters and Tracy and Doug took her to visit them out of state. In addition, her biological father calls her every week.

In July, the Christensens officially adopted Joy. "Our home is just like any other home now," Doug said. "Joy learned to regulate her temper thanks to the training she's received. She is such a good kid."